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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 000984

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [PTER](#) [KNNP](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: FM ON IRAN'S NUCLEAR AMBITIONS, REGIONAL VIEWS

REF: A. STATE 101574  
[1](#)B. TUNIS 949  
[1](#)C. TUNIS 699  
[1](#)D. 06 TUNIS 973

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Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) AND (d)

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SUMMARY  
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[1](#)1. (C) The July 12-14 visit of Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki capped months of active GOT-GOI engagement. However, Foreign Minister Abdallah told Ambassador on July 24 that there is no change in Tunisia's position on Iran's nuclear ambitions. Abdallah said Mottaki made clear Iran thinks there can be no solution to the Palestinian or Lebanese issues unless all parties' views are considered. On Iraq, Abdallah said that Mottaki warned that US hopes for a change in the Iraqi government would have "important consequences" on the ground. Abdallah added that the GOT had declined a proposed visit of Iranian President Ahmadinejad, at least for now. END SUMMARY.

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MOTTAKI VISIT  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) During his July 12-14 official visit to Tunis, Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki met with President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Foreign Minister Abdelwaheb Abdallah and Chamber of Advisors President Abdallah Kallel. Official statements and press coverage highlighted economic and commercial ties between the two countries, with news of the visit low-key in comparison to coverage of the recent visits of French President Sarkozy (Ref B) and Arab League Secretary General Amre Moussa. While noting Mottaki's deep appreciation for Ben Ali, the official Tunisian Press Agency release on Ben Ali's meeting with Mottaki made no mention of Ben Ali's comments during the meeting. In stark contrast, Iranian media, including IRNA, reported that Ben Ali said that Iran has a right to peaceful nuclear technology and that he had welcomed a visit of Iranian President Ahmadinejad.

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NUCLEAR AMBITIONS  
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[1](#)3. (C) On July 24, Foreign Minister Abdallah characterized the Iranian media reports as "propaganda" for domestic political consumption, adding for emphasis that no one in the GOT had said anything like what was reported by the Iranians. Abdallah told the Ambassador that there has been no change

in the GOT position on nuclear non-proliferation. The Ambassador, delivering Ref A demarche, encouraged Tunisia to pressure Iran through UNSC sanctions. Abdallah said that the Iranians claim their nuclear ambitions are purely peaceful. Abdallah said that he had asked why Iran continues with its enrichment program; Mottaki claimed it was an effort to identify alternative energy sources. Abdallah said he told Mottaki that "this policy could aggravate the situation in the region." Abdallah said that Mottaki characterized the P5 efforts as having "an orientation toward dialogue" and had mentioned the current talks ("second meeting") between Javier Solana and Larijani. Mottaki added that the IAEA would be making a positive report on Iranian cooperation.

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REGIONAL ISSUES  
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14. (C) Turning to Iran's views on regional issues, Abdallah said Mottaki focused on the reality of two powers in the Palestinian situation: Hamas and Fatah and that any solution would have to take this reality into account. While Abdallah noted that Mottaki had not specifically said Iran supports Hamas, he made it clear both sides' views must be considered. Abdallah said Mottaki had made similar comments on Lebanon, adding that neither side (Hizballah or the government) could act for the other. Abdallah told Ambassador that Iran was apparently pleased with its relations with France, as Iran was not opposed to, but rather encouraged by, the recent La Celle-St.Cloud talks on Lebanon. Abdallah said Mottaki had expressed support for the current Iraqi government and added that the US desire for change in the government would have "important consequences on the ground." Abdallah said he had asked Mottaki about US-Iranian contact; Mottaki said Iran hopes this dialogue would lead to concrete results.

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AHMADINEJAD VISIT  
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15. (C) Abdallah told the Ambassador that Mottaki had asked about Tunisia receiving a visit from Iranian President Ahmadinejad in the context of the latter's upcoming "regional visit." Abdallah said that Ahmadinejad would be in Algeria o/a August 6-8 and that Mottaki had asked if a visit to Tunisia would be possible before or after that stop. Abdallah said the GOT had said that would not be possible, as August was "too soon".

16. (SBU) Mottaki's visit follows more than a year of sustained Tunisian-Iranian cooperation (Ref C) that have been highlighted since FM Abdallah's February 2006 visit to Tehran. Since then, cooperation has largely focused on economic and cultural ties, including the signing of a preferential trade agreement in January 2007, the organization of an Iranian Tourist and Cultural Week in Tunis in May, and the opening of an Iranian Cultural Center in Tunis. In June, the Tunisian minister of higher education visited Iran and signed a memorandum of educational cooperation.

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COMMENT  
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17. (C) Despite Tunisia's continued engagement with Iran, there is no indication of significant support for Iran. Official and private Tunisians regularly denounce Iran's influence in the Middle East and reject any and all forms of religious government. They also reject, and appear alarmed by, the possibility of an Iran armed with nuclear weapons. In May, Ben Ali told CODEL Tanner (Ref B) that Iran's nuclear ambitions are a threat to the whole region. Yet, local media regularly headline Ahmadinejad's rhetoric, suggesting some

GOT-sanctioned support for Muslim resistance to Western hegemony. Walking a fine line, the GOT appears to be striking a balance between encouraging ties to Iran even as it rejects religious influence at home. END COMMENT.  
GODEC